

## THORKILD PETER RUDOLPH JACOBSEN

June 7, 1904–May 2, 1993

It is difficult to describe in a few words the rich and varied career of Thorkild Jacobsen. Members who attended the opening lecture in October 1991 heard Jacobsen, then 87, spin mesmerizing tales of his early days in the Oriental Institute. Jacobsen came to Chicago from his native Denmark in 1928 and began work on the Assyrian Dictionary staff. That was before the construction of the present Institute building, when the research headquarters and fledgling museum were located in Haskell Hall and the Institute was not yet ten years old. Jacobsen described staying in a downtown hotel with the gunfire of Prohibition era gangs audible in the background. James Henry Breasted was then midway through his term as founding Director, an august figure with whom the lowly research assistant was unlikely to have much contact. Jacobsen remained with the Institute for almost three and a half decades, holding a variety of posts ranging from research assistant, field Assyriologist, and archaeologist to Sumerologist, member of the editorial board of the Assyrian Dictionary, and Director. He became one of the world's foremost scholars on the ancient Near East and substantially shaped Oriental Institute research projects in ways that continue to the present day.

Jacobsen's scholarly work encompassed a variety of fields—archaeology, history, literature, religion, and grammar—to each of which he made seminal contributions. He was able to present minutely detailed research, such as his work on Dionysios bar Salibi's Syriac commentary on the book of Job, his critical edition of the Sumerian King List (published in 1939 and still the definitive edition), and his study of the textile industry at Ur. He pioneered new methods, such as his introduction of the archaeological surface survey to southern Iraq and his recreation of early Mesopotamian political history through literary as well as documentary sources. With Seton Lloyd, he discovered, surveyed, and published the traces of a seventh-century B.C. Assyrian aqueduct constructed by Sennacherib to provide Nineveh with water. His creative reconstructions of early Sumerian religion from literary sources and from comparative material stimulated a host of studies, positive and negative, reacting to his views. His translations of Sumerian poetry and his explanations of the intricacies of the Sumerian verbal system illumined these areas with fresh ideas. His visionary syntheses which drew on a full range of archaeological and philological experience, wide reading, and reflective insights into the human condition had an impact far beyond the immediate area of Mesopotamian studies.

At the culmination of his career here, Jacobsen served as third Director of the Institute (1946–1950), as Dean of the Humanities Division (1948–1951), as an Editor of the Assyrian Dictionary (1955–1959), and as Professor of Social Institutions (1946–1962). He was responsible for reopening the excavations at Nippur (dropped by the University of Pennsylvania a half century before) and for recruit-

ing two refugee scholars, Leo Oppenheim and Benno Landsberger, who played crucial roles in bringing the Assyrian Dictionary to publication. A creative humanist with an intense personal vision of scholarship and its priorities, he could not always convince others to share his views; and this led in turn to successive resignations, as Director, as Dean, as Editor, and finally as faculty member. This escape from joint enterprises freed Jacobsen for some of his most interesting later work in the fields of Sumerian religion and literature. In 1962, he accepted a visiting professorship at Harvard, which became a permanency the next year. He retired in 1974, but continued in active research, delivering his final address, as President of the American Oriental Society, less than two weeks before his death.

J. A. Brinkman

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